Commedia dell'arte and the Gate Theatre

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Introduction

From its foundation in 1928 onwards the commedia dell'arte theatrical style was consciously adopted as representative of the type of performance that the principal directors Micheál mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards wished to produce for the Gate Theatre. This is most obvious in mac Liammóir's logo design for the theatre designed for their first production and used throughout their careers. The logo depicts a harlequin opening up the gates of Comedy and Tragedy. It has been revealed by Charlotte Purkis that this logo copies in part a design for Peter Godfrey's and Velona Pilcher's London Gate Studio Theatre that showed a silhouette of a static actor on stage with a gate made of theatre flats behind him.[1] Mac Liammóir refashioned this design to make the actor into a dynamic harlequin, identified by his iconic patchwork trousers, thrusting the gates of classical theatre aside. Such an image declares the Gate's intentions to both conserve and break with theatrical conventions and to place the commedia dell'arte front and centre as the means to achieve that end.

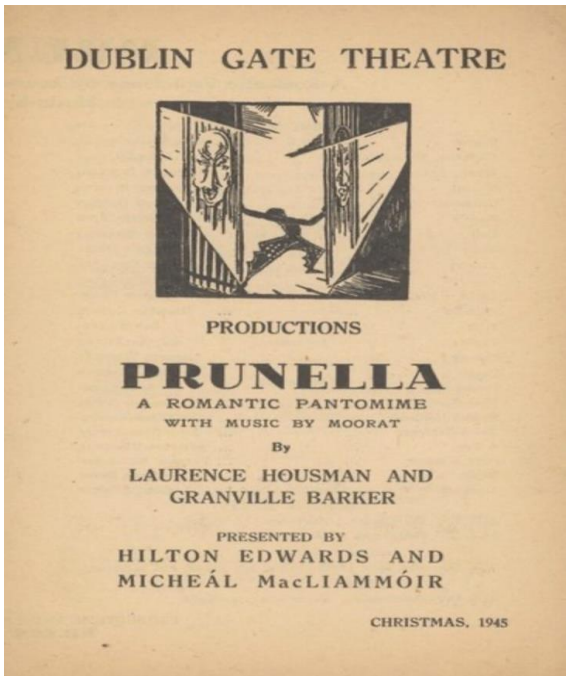

Figure 1 Cover of Progamme for Gate Production of *Prunella* in 1945 with the Gate logo. © Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway

Life-long dedication to the commedia dell'arte is compounded in Edwards' book on stagecraft, *The Mantle of Harlequin* (1958), where he admits to a 'preoccupation with Harlequin and his companions' and that the harlequinade has for him 'an extraordinary fascination, of profound and not easily explainable significance'.[2] The second half of this book

[1] Charlotte Purkis, 'The Other Gates: Anglo-American Influences on and from Dublin', *Cultural Convergence: The Dublin Gate Theatre 1928-1960*, eds. Ondrej Pilny, Ruud van den Beuken and Ian R. Walsh (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2021), 107-140.
[2] Hilton Edwards, *The Mantle of Harlequin* (Dublin: Progress House, 1958), 76.

sees him deliver his views on the art of theatre by imagining a harlequin dispensing advice to an inquisitive amateur. In its theatricality, as well as its emphasis on the international and the queer, Edwards and mac Liammóir found the commedia dell'arte to be an ideal theatrical precedent for their own ambitions and practice.

Adopting it as a model also served to mark the Gate as a new and different theatrical venture in Ireland where the national and literary concerns of the Abbey theatre had come to dominate. The commedia dell'arte as a performance-based tradition without scripts 'depended primarily upon the actor and not the playwright'.[3] Dialogue was improvised around a skeleton plot or agreed scenario by a group of actors playing masked stock characters. Over time the stock characters developed into fixed and familiar roles such as Harlequin, Columbine and Pantalone each with a distinctive mask. Actors wearing these masks had to clearly express themselves through the movement of their bodies, as they could no longer rely on facial expression to communicate and react. Thus the term 'character mask' does not simply refer to what is worn upon the actor's face but encompasses the entire body of the actor who must move with particular actions associated with the character. The physicality of the body is foregrounded as the actor becomes iconographic in their movements rather than projecting an individual psychology. In this commedia, practitioners 'were unequalled in their profession, combining the attributes of dancer, singer, acrobat, low comedian, mime and pantomimist, together with incredible agility of mind and body'.[4] Performances took place on make-shift stages outdoors and the actors would directly address the audience throughout commenting on their actions, other characters and the development of the plot. This was a dynamic physical performance style that was full of theatricality. As such, when Edwards and mac Liammóir adopted Harlequin and the commedia dell'arte as emblematic of the Gate they could not have presented a more contrasting style of theatre to that established at the Abbey, renowned for its achievements in playwriting, realistic presentation and stillness in acting.[5]

The internationalism of the commedia'dell arte also served as exemplary for the Gate. It was a European-wide practice: originating in Italy in the sixteenth century but then spreading throughout the continent as it travelled and evolved over the centuries. Many of the stock characters were adopted and developed most notably by French romanticism in the eighteenth century and the decadents of the late nineteenth century, with Harlequin, Columbina and Pierrot in particular becoming popular subjects of literature, painting and performance, representing beauty, rebellion against religious and moral conformity and genius.[6] Modernist artists and writers, led by a new vibrant theatrical avant garde in early twentieth century Russia, saw the form of commedia and its characters as responsive to the effects of mass industrialisation on human behaviour in their inventiveness, contradiction and alienation.[7] Mac Liammóir in *Theatre In Ireland* wrote of how he and Edwards wished to

[3] Phyllis Hartnoll, *The Theatre: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 61.
[4] Hartnoll 61.
[5] Brenna Katz Clarke, *The Emergence of the Irish Peasant play at the Abbey Theatre* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 53.
[6] See Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot: the Commedia Dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination* (New York: Macmillan, 1986).
[7] See essays by Franco Ruffini, Franco Vazzoler, Erika Fischer-Lichte in *Commedia dell'Arte in Context,* eds. Christopher B. Balme, Piermario Vescovo and Daniele Vianello (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

present the Irish people with 'a totally different conception of the theatre'[8] to what had been presented at the Abbey. They did not wish to offer drama that looked inward to national concerns but 'aimed to turn the eyes of the people outward on the world'.[9] Daniele Vianello states, 'The influence of the commedia dell'arte, in fact, transcends national boundaries and narrow fields of study and can be regarded as one of the elements that characterize both twentieth century and contemporary theatrical perceptions'.[10] The semiology of the masks and the conventionalized plots allowed for it to have a universal appeal, but also in its improvisation and direct address to the audience it would adapt and change to its given circumstances to become local and specific. J. Douglas Clayton writes of how the commedia dell'arte is now at once 'a motif, a set of themes, a style (*the Pierrotic*), a theatrical program, a motley group of images, a metaphor'.[11] It is for him 'not one phenomenon, but a series of interconnected ones, some reinforcing each other, others distancing themselves'.[12] Indeed, it is its very mutability that made it attractive to artists such as mac Liammóir and Edwards functioning to encapsulate their artistic values.

The influence of European dramatists has been examined in relation to Irish drama in several publications,[13] most notably by Katherine Worth's seminal *The Irish Drama of Europe From Yeats to Beckett,* but less has been written on the impact of European stagecraft on the development of Irish theatre practice[14] and precious little on the commedia dell'arte in Ireland.[15] This article shows how connected and indebted Irish theatre was to the history and developments of European stagecraft through Edwards's and mac Liammóir's engagement with commedia dell'arte at the Gate. It challenges the notion that Irish theatre after the Celtic revival period became insular and creatively moribund until the international successes of the dramas of Brian Friel, Hugh Leonard and Tom Murphy in the 1960s.[16] It also hopefully adds to the growing area of queer scholarship on Irish theatre in showing how two gay men used the masks of the commedia as a means to imagine and embody publicly a queer identity in a time of extreme homophobia.

Drawing on materials in the Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway, newspaper archives, previous research by Christopher Fitz-Simons, David Clare and Nicola Morris and the

[8] Micheál Mac Liammóir, *Theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: Three Candles Press, 1950), 25.
[9] Mac Liammóir*, Theatre in Ireland,* 25.
[10] Daniele Vianello, 'Introduction Commedia dell'arte: History, Myth, Reception', *Commedia dell'Arte in Context,* eds. Christopher B. Balme, Piermario Vescovo and Daniele Vianello (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-14.
[11] J. Douglas Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd: the Commedia dell'Arte/Balagan in Twentieth Century Russian Theatre and Drama* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014), 4.
[12] Clayton 4.
[13] Notable examples include: Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Irina Ruppo Malone, *Ibsen and the Irish Revival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
[14] Notable exceptions include: Elaine Sisson, 'A Note on What Happened: Experimental Influences on the Irish Stage: 1919-1929', *Kritika Kultura* 15 (2010): 132-148; Siobhán O'Gorman 'Tartan Transpositions: Materialising Europe, Ireland and Scotland in the Designs of Molly MacEwen', *The Gate Theatre: A Stage of Emancipation*. eds. Marguérite Corporaal and Ruud van den Beuken (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 167-188; Ian R. Walsh, 'Directors and Designers since 1960', *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, eds. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 443-458.
[15] One of the few articles, if not the only one, on this topic is Christopher Murray, 'Three Plays by Austin Clarke and the *Commedia* tradition', *Studi Irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* 1.1 (2011): 175-188.
[16] A much cited essay that posits this view is Thomas Kilroy, 'A Generation of Playwrights', *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), 1-8.

books of Edwards and mac Liammóir this article aims to trace the origins of their engagement with and conception of the commedia dell'arte and how this was manifested in their writings and theatre practice. Building on the work of Eibhear Walshe and Richard Pine on mac Liammóir's adoption of masks of identity, I also argue that both Edwards and mac Liammóir assumed the masks of Harlequin and Pierrot in their writing and performing in order to reveal and shape their queer identities. The practice of the commedia dell'arte thus offered them a queer space of belonging in which to invent themselves. Finally, I examine relevant revues and two full productions at the Gate that were staged with the commedia dell'arte approach.

Knowledge and Application of the Commedia dell'arte

Edwards would write in 1958 'The magic of the commedia dell'arte has never ceased to haunt me'.[17] Yet neither Edwards nor Mac Liammóir studied the commedia in Italy or under an Italian commedia practitioner. Their exposure to the commedia dell' arte chiefly comes from its representation and reinterpretation in works of international modernism and its continued presence in the English theatre through variety and pantomime traditions.[18] In his practice, writings and in the writings about him by mac Liammóir we know that Edwards was a keen follower and later proponent of the modernist movement to 're-theatricalise the theatre'[19] that began in the early twentieth century led by directors like Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia, Max Reinhardt in Germany, Jacques Copeau in France and Edward Gordon Craig in Britain.[20] All of these theatre practitioners rejected the dominant modes of psychological verisimilitude and photographic realism on stage in favour of methods designed to directly engage audiences in the performance event. As such they strove, as Edwards himself would put it, for the theatre to be 'intensely itself' in order to give 'audiences something they cannot see or hear, to better effect outside its walls'.[21] This modernist movement to re-theatricalise the theatre, through these international figures, took inspiration from the theatricality of commedia dell'arte. Clayton writes that the commedia had a semiotic function for such artists signifying their 'allegiance to the revolution in theatrical art' and that 'The lozenge-covered figure of Harlequin became a sort of icon of the modernist revolution'.[22] Edwards makes clear to the reader in *The Mantle of Harlequin* that it was the theatricality of the commedia that attracted him to the form: 'for me these figures move in a world lit by spot and flood and footlights, where the night seems illuminated by a painted moon, where everything is as real as "thinking makes it so" and where no sorrow long survives the fall of the curtain'.[23]

Another means by which Edwards was exposed to and influenced by commedia came via his performances in Ronald Frankau's Cabaret Kittens which he described to designer

[17] Edwards, *Mantle of Harlequin,* 7.
[18] See Philip B. Zarilli, 'CASE STUDY: British Pantomime: How "Bad" Theatre remains popular', *Theatre Histories: An Introduction, Second Edition*, eds. Philip B. Zarilli, Bruce McConachie, Gary J. Williams and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei (Abington, Oxon: Routledge, 2010) 347-351.
[19] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 62.
[20] See Micheál mac Liammóir*, All for Hecuba: An Irish Theatrical Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1947) and Hilton Edwards's *The Mantle of Harlequin.*
[21] Edwards, *The Mantle of Harlequin,* 25.
[22] Clayton 7. Such iconography was very apparent in the Gate Theatre logo.
[23] Edwards, *Mantle of Harlequin,* 76.

Molly McEwan as 'a Pierrot show'.[24] He toured with this cabaret in England, Ireland, Scotland and South Africa before joining Anew MacMaster's repertory company and meeting mac Liammóir. He considered the experience formative, writing:

> Cabaret brought home to me the tremendous power of direct contact with the audience, which became less in the theatre, with its remoteness; and I felt that the technique of the variety stage would help to bridge this gap. I consider the variety stage to be the only legitimate theatre. I have been greatly influenced by this experience.[25]

In this statement Edwards is in sympathy with Edward Gordon Craig, the theatrical visionary, who considered the commedia dell'arte as the 'essential Theatre'[26] and linked the immediacy and intimacy of the English variety stage with that of the older Italian comedic tradition. Theatre historian James Fisher in his article 'Harlequinade: Commedia dell'arte on the Early Twentieth Century British Stage' writes:

> When Sarah Bernhardt was widely criticized for leaving the legitimate stage to perform in a London music hall, Craig applauded her appearance there, writing that she "leaves a worn out artificiality for a living artificiality" and that the "variety stage is the sole remaining link connecting us with that stupendous achievement of the sixteenth century known as the Commedia dell'arte."[27]

It was when working as a child actor on the English stage that mac Liammóir, or Alfred Willmore, as he was then known, was exposed to the influence of the 'living artificiality' of the commedia dell'arte on the English stage. His performances of this time garnered some renown when he starred in such popular productions as J. M Barrie's *Peter Pan*[28] and in the title role of the stage adaptation of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* by Joseph Comyns Carr in 1912.[29] However, in his memoir *Enter the Goldfish,* he writes of his instinct towards a more physical and histrionic approach to acting as something that was not so much learnt as innate to him (or his alter ego Martin Weldon),[30] explicitly linking this to the commedia tradition:

> Often he would improvise, after the manner of the commedia dell' arte (of which he had of course never heard), and the most lurid and impassioned speeches and scenes would flow from him, and inspire him to bodily contortions and frenzied gesticulations as he mouthed scene after scene of treachery, of thwarted love, of deaths from poisoned cups, or daggers, or lightning bolts. Such imaginings were frequent features of his repertoire.[31]

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[24] Christopher Fitz-Simon*, The Boys: a double biography of Micheál mac Líammóir and Hilton Edwards* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2002), 48.
[25] Fitz-Simon 49.
[26] James Fisher, 'Harlequinade: Commedia dell'Arte on the Early Twentieth-Century British Stage', *Theatre Journal* 41.1 (1989): 33.
[27] Fisher 33.
[28] According to Fitz-Simon 'Alfred Willmore was engaged in *Peter Pan* for four to five months each year from December 1911 until March 1914', *The Boys*, 27.
[29] Fitz-Simon 29-30.
[30] Although *Enter a Goldfish* is described as a memoir and details real events in mac Liammóir's life, the book takes the form of a fictionalized account, with names of people changed, including the author who refers to himself throughout as Martin Weldon.
[31] Press, 2018), 70.
[31] Michéal Mac Liammóir, *Enter a Goldfish: Memoirs of an Irish Actor, Young and Old* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 49.

These early improvisations would serve him well as preparation for his role of Michael Darling in *Peter Pan*. As Fisher notes, Barrie's perennially popular drama is itself indebted to the British pantomime tradition and harlequinades that had developed from the commedia dell'arte with its britches roles for actresses, along with other elements of English pantomime including 'a dash of cynical Gozzian fantasy'.[32] The experience of Peter Pan no doubt helped to cultivate in mac Liammóir a fondness for the English pantomime tradition. He would later go on to appear as a pantomime dame in a comic sketch featured in the Gate Revue show: *Harlequinade* (1941).[33] However, it was Diaghilev's Ballet Russes and their production of *Carnaval* (1910), a short ballet choreographed by Michel Fokine based on music by Robert Schumann, inspired by the commedia dell'arte that would have a powerful lasting effect on mac Liammóir.

There are few direct references to the commedia in mac Liammóir's writings but there are several mentions of Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, his admiration for the designs of Léon Bakst and his fanaticism for the dancer Nijinsky, particularly his performance of Harlequin in *Carnaval*. He saw Nijinsky dance the role in London in 1912 and 1913.[34] At this time he was starring in *Oliver Twist* alongside Herbert Beerbohm Tree who played the part of Fagin. Writing on this experience in *Enter a Goldfish* mac Liammóir recollects Tree commenting on his performance as Oliver in rehearsal:

> 'You see, Boy Blue, it is perfectly clear to me that you can do it supremely well if you really want to and if you will act naturally as a natural if unfortunate boy, not pose in strange and beautiful attitudes as if you were appearing in the Russian – Ah! I remember! You told me the other day that you had been watching the damned Russian Ballet! Ah! the great, Nijinsky! But acting is not dancing, Boy Blue, though dancing at moments may include the art of acting: a reversal of this leads to mannerism…posing…artificiality…be natural, Boy Blue, be yourself and believe in what you are saying and what Dickens, adapted by Mr. Comyns Carr, has given to you to say…continue to watch the great Nijinsky and the great Pavlova too – but do not let their art obscure your own.'[35]

These comments by Tree not only identify mac Liammóir's devotion to Nijinsky but they also indicate mac Liammóir's own preference and capacity for physicality in performance. One of his early triumphs as an actor at the Gate was in Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No!* (1929). In this metatheatrical piece mac Liammóir played a histrionic actor performing as Irish patriot Robert Emmet in a pastiche of a Victorian melodrama. The actor is accidentally hit on the head during the performance and awakens on the stage thinking he really is Emmet. In this role mac Liammóir was allowed to revel in the mannered posing artificiality that Tree was discouraging. Indeed, the early repertoire of the Gate, with its commitment to what Edwards

[32] Fisher 36.

[33] mac Liammóir played 'Grandma, an ex-principal boy' in a short parody of pantomime written by Harry O'Donovan (a writer of the annual pantomime at the Gaiety) entitled 'Aladdin and the Beanstalk and his Wonderful Cat or the Glass Slipper'. See Programme for *Harlequinade*: *A Christmas Party at the Gate Theatre*, December 1941. Gate Theatre Digital Archives, NUI Galway. 1729_MPG_0001.pdf | Ref. 5117

[34] Richard Pine, 'Micheál macLiammóir: the Erotic-Exotic and the Dublin Gate Theatre', *The Gate Theatre, Dublin: Inspiration and Craft*. eds. David Clare,Des Lally and Patrick Lonergan (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang/Carysfort Press, 2018), 70.

[35] Mac Liammóir, *Enter a Goldfish,* 76-77.

termed a 'theatre theatrical',[36] consisted of expressionistic and symbolist dramas by playwrights such as Toller, Kaiser, Evreinov, Rice and Wilde that challenged naturalistic representation and demanded that mac Liammóir and the Gate ensemble of actors all pose in 'strange and beautiful attitudes'.[37]

The deep impact of *Carnaval* on mac Liammóir went beyond performing; it also impressed itself upon his design work and his playwriting. The influence of Léon Bakst's costume design of Harlequin in particular can be traced in mac Liammóir's own designs, including the logo for the Gate Theatre, the illustration of Harlequin in *The Mantle of Harlequin* and the costume design for Truffaldino for the Gate Production of *The Servant of Two Masters*. In his final play *Prelude in Kazbek Street* (1973) we follow the tragic love life of an Irish ballet dancer who is performing a revival of Nijinsky's dances with the Ballet Russes in Paris and he is described in the stage directions at one point as moving like Nijinsky's Harlequin.[38]

Figure 2. Costume design by Léon Bakst for Harlequin in *Carnaval* (1910).

Figure 3. Costume Design by Micheál mac Liammóir for Truffaldino in the Gate production of *The Servant of Two Masters* in 1973. © Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway

[36] Hilton Edwards, 'Production', *The Gate Theatre Dublin,* ed. Bulmer Hobson (Dublin: The Gate Theatre, 1934), 21-46, 22.
[37] Mac Liammóir*, Enter a Goldfish,* 76.
[38] Micheál mac Liammóir, 'Prelude in Kazbek Street', *Selected Plays of Micheál mac Liammóir*, ed. John Barrett (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), 289.

But fascination with the Ballet Russes's *Carnaval* was not mac Liammóir's alone. When writing directly on his notion of the commedia dell'arte, Edwards in *The Mantle of Harlequin* surprisingly does not mention international avant garde theatre directors such as Craig or Meyerhold or the English variety stage as shaping his conception of the commedia dell'arte. Instead he explains:

> When I imagine Harlequin, Columbine, the Doctor, Pulcinella, Pantaloon and all their crew, it is not only as the actors of the old Italian Comedy that I see them. Neither do I feel much affinity with those pale shadows of themselves that they became when as an afterthought of that uniquely English invention, the Pantomime, for here they appear like cut flowers, decorative but rootless, and only momentarily alive. I think rather of the characters that were recreated by Fokine for the music of Schumann's Carnival, or it may be of those earlier Fetes galantes by Watteau, in which we find the ancient comrades Gallicised, and one of them reborn in France as Pierrot.[39]

Carnaval functioned as a touchstone for both Edwards's and mac Liammóir's idea of commedia and it was exemplary of the type of cultural convergence that this form of theatre produced in its modern iterations. The ballet was choreographed and performed by Russian dancers, to the music of a German composer, with characters from the Italian comedy and also featuring the later French character-mask of Pierrot. It was quintessentially modern in bringing together different forms (dance, acting, visual arts), mixing older styles to create something innovative and new. It was also homoerotic and queer in its challenge to heteronormativity by presenting the vibrant male body as spectacle through the dancing of Harlequin and the effeminacy, sensitivity and inefficacy of Pierrot.

Queer Masks of the Commedia dell'arte: Harlequin and Pierrot

The sexually ambiguous English Alfred Willmore's reinvention of himself as the Irishman Micheál mac Liammóir has been considered as originating in the work of W.B Yeats and Oscar Wilde with their interest in masks.[40] Wilde's famous aphorism in *The Critic as Artist* that 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and, he will tell you the truth',[41] has been read by many scholars as particularly apt for mac Liammóir. Eibhear Walshe tells us that his self-invention as a 'neo-Celtic thespian' allowed him to don a 'Yeatsian mask' enabling him to dissent and separate himself from a British masculinist heterosexuality that viewed the homoeroticism of Wilde as suspect and questionable.[42] Walshe points out that 'Wilde remained key in his success at maintaining this fictive persona'[43] as mac Liammóir continually engaged with Wilde's life and works through productions of his plays at the Gate, his one-man show on the life of Wilde *The Importance of Being Oscar* (1960) and his book *An*

[39] Edwards, *Mantle of Harlequin*, 76.
[40] See Eibhear Walshe, 'The Importance of Staging Oscar: Wilde at the Gate', *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, eds. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (Oxford: Oxford Unviersity Press, 2016), 217-30; Richard Pine, 'Micheál macLiammóir: the Erotic-Exotic and the Dublin Gate Theatre', *The Gate Theatre, Dublin: Inspiration and Craft*, eds David Clare, Des Lally and Patrick Lonergan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 63-96; Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)
[41] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', *Collected Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1045.
[42] Walshe 219.
[43] Walshe 219.

Oscar of no Importance (1968). Only Richard Pine has sought to consider mac Liammóir's masked identity in terms of the commedia, a form of theatre wherein masks are essential to its creation and vitality. Pine writes specifically of how mac Liammóir absorbed into himself the character of Harlequin, as interpreted by Nijinsky in the Ballet Russes production of *Carnaval* and that 'it was as Harlequin that he [mac Liammóir] played Hamlet, Emmet, Wilde'.[44] Pine writes how he is convinced that Nijinsky's Harlequin in *Carnaval '*strongly determined Alfred Willmore towards the catalysis of the indefinite, amorphous, multi-character chameleon who is never entirely what he seems, who continually reshapes and re-presents himself so as never to be identified, denied, pinned down'.[45]

Edwards has rarely been written of in terms of masks and yet in his writings we find he professes a view, redolent of Wilde, that 'all life outside the theatre appears unreal'[46] and it is he that writes directly on theatrical masks in *The Mantle of Harlequin*. In the section of the book where he writes in the voice of Harlequin there is an instance where he is about to go on stage and suddenly looks for his mask. The amateur player who is observing him tells him that he is already wearing it, to which he replies, with the revealing line: 'I'm so used to the thing that, sometimes, it's difficult for me to remember when I'm masked and when I am…myself'.[47] Here it is clear that Edwards wishes to point out that for the professional theatre practitioner there is little divide between the theatrical and the real. The hesitancy marked by the ellipsis before 'myself' undermines any sense of self that lies outside the masked-self and as such the line then echoes that of Wilde's already quoted line from the *Artist as Critic* with the mask revealing rather than hiding truth. Edwards, a queer artist, similar to his professional and personal partner mac Liammóir, adopted a theatricalized persona that allowed him to hide his gay sexuality in plain sight.

In comparison to mac Liammóir, his self-invention was less extreme in that he never claimed to be of a different nationality. David Clare and Nicola Morris have pointed out that in Gate Theatre studies Edwards has been portrayed as almost excessively English. He is portrayed as a 'no-nonsense Englishman' in contrast to the 'elaborate pose of his partner as a Romantic Irishman'.[48] Clare and Morris have discovered through their genealogical study that Edwards had an Irish-born grandfather on his mother's side and would have these days been considered eligible to play for Ireland.[49] This was something that Edwards rarely admitted to and seemed happy to omit, always stressing his international outlook when it came to theatre. In his book *Mantle of Harlequin,* he speaks of how the commedia is for him something 'almost personal'[50] and professes to wearing two masks taken from the commedia dell'arte. He writes: 'My role, it seems to me, has always been that of Pierrot…yet sometimes I cannot resist filching Harlequin's wand.'[51] Edwards's conception of Pierrot is that of the figure found in *Carnaval*. In a section of *The Mantle of Harlequin* where he brings to mind all

[44] Pine 71.
[45] Pine 73.
[46] Edwards, *Mantle of Harlequin,* 11.
[47] Edwards, *Mantle of Harlequin,* 80.
[48] David Clare and Nicola Morris, 'The Transnational Roots of Key figures from the Early Years of the Gate Theatre, Dublin', *Cultural Convergence: The Dublin Gate Theatre 1928-1960*, eds. Ondrej Pilny, Ruud van den Beuken and Ian R. Walsh (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2021), 80.
[49] Clare and Morris 80.
[50] Edwards, *Mantle of Harlequin*, 7.
[51] Edwards, *Mantle of Harlequin,* 76.

of the characters of the commedia that haunt him he sees before him the sad clown: 'Pierrot fumbles with his long helpless sleeves to catch the butterfly that when he has caught it he no longer desires: it is no longer alive'.[52] This is of course the famous piece of stage business of Pierrot in *Carnaval* where he chases Papillion (the butterfly). Identifying himself as Pierrot in this instance casts Edwards as the opposite of Harlequin. This is made clear in the choreography of the ballet: Pierrot's sad and forlorn movements drag him to the earth with his sleeves dusting the stage while Harlequin jumps flamboyantly towards the heavens. Pierrot is costumed in white with a ghostly pallor while Harlequin is distinctive in his vibrant multi-coloured patchwork trousers. What links Harlequin and Pierott is their queer theatricality. The Pierrot figure represents a different type of queer identity to the frenzied energy of the 'indefinite, amorphous, multi-character chameleon'[53] of Nijinsky's Harlequin. Clayton writes in *Pierrot in Petrograd*:

> Nothing seemed to incarnate better the essence of decadence than the moonstruck figure of Pierrot. Inhabiting a bizarre night world signaled by his pallor and his infatuation with the moon, androgynous, effeminate, yet potentially sadistic, Pierrot expressed the revolt of the decadents (Huysmans, LaForgue, Wilde) against all that was healthy, normal and mediocre – in a word, he served to *épater le bourgeois*. Pierrot exhibited – flaunted even – all those characteristics that Max Nordau, in his influential book, condemned as "degenerate". On the sexual level, there were in Pierrot strong hints of homosexuality.[54]

It is tempting to simply imagine Edwards as the Pierrot to mac Liammóir's Harlequin, defining the pair in terms of opposition as was done in relation to Edwards's Englishness and mac Liammóir's 'Irishness'. Edwards did play Pierrot to mac Liammóir's Harlequin in Nicholas Evreinov's *A Merry Death: A Russian Harlequinade* staged as part of the revue show *Christmas Pie* in 1930 and revived as *Exit Harlequin* in the later revue, *Masquerade* in 1943. However, Edwards also puts on the mask of Harlequin as the title of his book suggests: *The Mantle of Harlequin*. Likewise, mac Liammóir played a Pierrot on stage twice. Firstly in his own translation of Granville Barker's *Prunella* for An Taibhdhearc in 1928 and then later reprising the role in a Gate production of the play in 1945. The programme note for the 1945 production states the play can be taken as 'a translation of the spirit and person of the commedia dell'arte of Schumann's *Carnaval*'.[55] Here then the Pierrot of Granville Barker is made into that of the Pierrot of *Carnaval.* Edwards too reprised his role as a singing Pierrot with the Cabaret Kittens in the prologue to the Gate Revue *Harlequinade* produced at the Cork Opera House, the Gaiety Theatre and the Gate in 1941 and 1942. Interestingly although they performed as different incarnations of Pierrot, it is the only stage role the two ever shared in the entirety of their career.

In their continued performances as Pierrot and Harlequin on stage and in their writing Edwards and mac Liammóir were able to imagine and embody publicly a theatricalised queer identity in a devoutly Catholic and conservative country where homosexuality would only be decriminalized in 1993. When mac Liammóir decided to write his play *Prelude in Kazbek Street* in 1973 with a leading gay character, it is perhaps unsurprising that the play again returns to

[52] Edwards, *Mantle of Harlequin*, 76.
[53] Pine 73.
[54] Clayton 9.
[55] Progamme for *Prunella,* 1945. Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway, 1750_MPG_0001.pdf | Ref. 5139.

the imagery of *Carnaval* in order to navigate the representation of a queer identity. The plot revolves around the tragic love life of a lonely international ballet star, an Irishman who performs under the Russian name of Serge Kovalesky, who continually falls for men ill-suited to him due to their brutality or their denial of their own homosexuality. His life thus feels like a 'prelude to something that never happens'.[56] As previously mentioned, the piece takes place in Paris as Serge dances a season of Ballet Russes revivals. He dances all the roles made famous by Nijinsky but his confidant Maggie tells him that there is a shadow that comes over him after he plays the role of Harlequin in *Carnaval*. This shadow reveals his loneliness and his inability to play the role of the Harlequin. He is instead a Pierrot figure who will continue to chase that which he cannot have like the moonstuck clown fumbling after the butterfly.

Figure 4. Photograph of Christopher Cazenove as Serge Kovalesky and Aiden Grennell as Robert Marshall in *Prelude in Kazbek Street* (1973). © Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway

The play was well received in the press and its subject matter did not cause any controversy.[57] This is at first surprising when we consider the later outrage for openly gay works in Ireland.[58] But on closer inspection the play is deliberately unthreatening in its recourse to presenting itself as a verbose and largely static piece. We never get any overt display of sexuality despite the subject matter. Serge is a dancer who does not dance for us. The male body as spectacle, so central to the appeal of the Ballet Russes and Nijinsky, is denied to the audience here and although the play contains some flirting there is no consummation of love, not even an embrace or a kiss, between the men.

[56] Barrett 293.

[57] Fitz-Simon 295.

[58] In 1976 Gay Sweatshop Theatre company performed two plays at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin which led to public controversy with members of Dublin Council objecting to continued support of the arts centre if it was to continue to allow such productions to be staged. See Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, *Riot and Great Anger: Stage Censorship in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

Witty queer dramas of masks and manners were familiar to Dublin audiences by the 1970s through the work of Wilde, popularised in Ireland by Edwards and mac Liammóir productions at the Gate.[59] The naturalism of *Prelude in Kazbek Street* along with its lack of movement and spectacle keeps the audience at a distance from the characters and action of the play. This seems in direct contrast to the earlier work of the Gate, which sought direct connection with the audience by means of theatricality. It reveals cautiousness by the partners when producing a play that takes queer desire as its subject. In the Gate Theatre Digital Archives at NUI Galway there are extensive typed notes addressed to mac Liammóir made by Edwards on an early draft of *Prelude in Kazbek Street*. In this document Edwards commends the play for its treatment of its theme, writing of how it is, 'very tenderly expressed with great reticence and is perfectly safe' but then also warns against 'any statement of the physical' as this 'would be distasteful'.[60] The disruptive potential of the physicality and theatricality of commedia is not allowed to make its entrance here and so the play remains a sad prelude and never a fully realised production of an Irish drama where gay characters are free to show physical intimacy on stage.[61]

Gate Productions and the Commedia dell'arte

Although the influence of the commedia on the work of Edwards and mac Liammóir at the Gate was primarily in style and approach, it was nevertheless engaged more directly in their revues and in two full productions: *The Merchant of Venice* in 1946 and *The Servant of Two Masters* in 1973. The Gate Revues were chiefly staged in the early 1940s when war prohibited international tours and Edwards and mac Liammóir agreed a contract to perform their seasons at the larger Gaiety Theatre producing more mainstream and commercially bankable productions, although they also staged two revues in the early 1930s: *Christmas Pie* (1930) and *The Dublin Revue* (1931). All of these revues were made up of an eclectic mix of satirical sketches written by mac Liammóir and other members of the company, cabaret numbers, dance interludes and one-act plays by international experimentalists such as Gertrude Stein, August Strindberg and Elmer Rice or Irish playwrights such as W.B Yeats, Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde. A sketch entitled 'Buttery Blondes' written by mac Liammóir would appear on the same bill as Yeats's *The King of the Great Clock Tower* and a reading of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Performed during the holiday periods of Christmas and summer, the presentation of comic sketches in these revues were similar in nature to English variety shows and pantomimes, which had their origins in the commedia dell'arte. This was openly acknowledged in the names of three of the revues: *Harlequinade* (1941), *Summer Harlequinade* (1942) and *Masquerade* (1943). In both Harlequinades the show began with a prologue with Edwards performing as a singing Pierrot but the most direct link to the commedia in these revues was the performance of Evreinov's *A Merry Death: A Russian Harlequinade* performed in *A Christmas Pie* in 1930 and then under the title *Exit Harlequin* in *Masquerade* in 1943.

[59] See Eibhear Walshe, 'The Importance of Staging Oscar: Wilde at the Gate', *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, eds. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 217-230.
[60] 'Hilton's Notes on KAZBEK for Michael, 7th December 1972' Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway. GADM_00002179.pdf | Ref. 5775.
[61] It would not be until 1985 that two men would kiss on an Irish stage in Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme* at the Abbey theatre.

In many ways Evreinov's short play brings together many aspects that have already been discussed about the Gate and commedia dell'arte in its theatricality and its queerness, with its attack on bourgeois values. The play concerns a Harlequin who is visited by Death and is to make his final exit. He does so with a smile on his face without regret for the hedonistic life he has had. In the final moments Pierrot addresses the audience directly and reveals that the Harlequin is not so much dead as forced to exit because the author has written it so. The play is a metatheatrical farce that stages a comic confusion of the real and the imaginary celebrating the conquering spirit of the 'living artificiality'[62] of the Harlequin and commedia players over Death's dominion. It is also the only production where we find both Edwards and mac Liammóir on stage together in the roles of commedia characters.

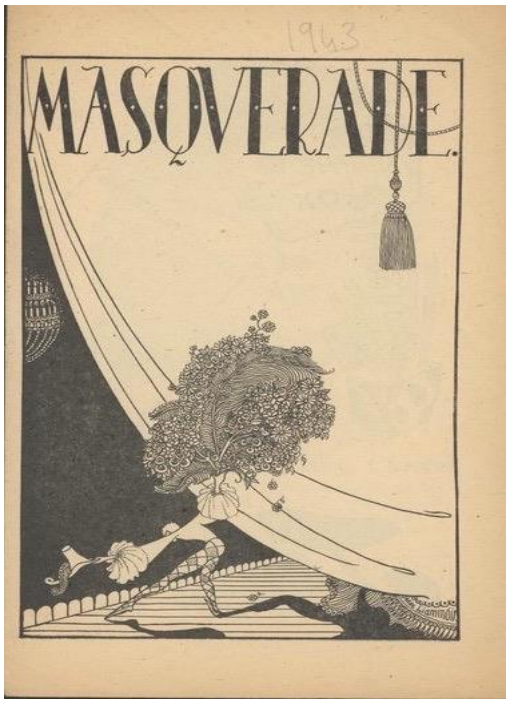

Figure 5. Programme cover for *Masquerade* (1943) with illustration of a bowing Harlequin holding an ornate bouquet by mac Liammóir. © Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway

[62] Fisher 33.

Figure 6. Hilton Edwards as Pierrot in Evreinov's *A Merry Death: A Russian Harlequinade* performed as part of the Gate revue *Christmas Pie* in 1930. Image courtesy of Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections Northwestern University Libraries.

The first full Gate production to engage with the commedia dell'arte was Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* presented at the Gaiety in 1946. Edwards transposed the drama to eighteenth-century Venice with a cast of commedia characters helping to stage the Bard's famous play. In a handbill advertising the Gate season the production is described thus:

> The ingenious history of Portia and the Jew is offered as a bouquet by the figures of the Italian Commedia del'arte [sic] with Pierrots, Columbine, Doctors and Punchinellos, to say nothing of Harlequin whose wand transforms the scenes from Ghetto to Palace and from Canal side streets to the gardens of Belmont in full view of the audience.[63]

Here Edwards and mac Liammóir mix different styles and evolutions of the commedia to serve their own aesthetic and solve issues of staging. And they were pleased with the result. In an article published in *Shakespeare Survey*, that takes the form of a conversation between Edwards and mac Liammóir on issues of staging Shakespeare, based on their experiences, mac Liammóir claims the 1946 production of *The Merchant of Venice* to be their greatest triumph of all the Gate Shakespeare productions. He comments that it was 'by far the nearest approach to what we are both seeking than anything else that we have done.'[64] What both men sought was a production of Shakespeare where the words and deeds of the characters would directly impact upon a contemporary audience engaging them afresh, free from the deadening cultural reverence given to these texts. In the conversation, Edwards is not convinced that the production was 'the final answer to the question of how to do the plays'. but he does share 'a small satisfaction in remembering our *Merchant*, especially the idea of

[63] Handbill promoting the 1946 season 'February 1946 and Onwards'. Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway 1840_HB_0001.pdf | Ref. 7717.
[64] Micheál Mac Liammóir, 'Three Shakespearian Productions: A Conversation', *Shakespeare Survey* 1.1 (1948): 89-97, 95.

having a band of actors who are in and yet not of the play to do the work usually allotted, in a childish-hide-behind-the-curtain secrecy that deceives nobody, to the scene-shifter'.[65]

The presentation of Shakespeare's play as staged by commedia characters in the eighteenth century added a level of playful theatricality to this tired piece inviting the audience to join in a game of make-believe and thus liberating the staging from any need of verisimilitude. As already mentioned in Edwards's comments the commedia device allowed for quick transitions between scenes. This helped maintain intensity in the performance, which was something that Edwards always sought in his direction of a production.[66] This aspect was also one that Seamus Kelly in *The Irish Times* was keen to commend about the production writing how 'the charming harlequinade-cum-ballet sequences of the Commedia dell' arte proved to be an 'adroit expedient' for 'by-passing those tedious Shakespearean scene-changes' giving 'the play a speed, freshness and colour'.[67] For the reviewer in the *Evening Herald* the transitions were a highlight but he/she also writes:

> Much visual beauty was achieved especially in the trial and casket scenes. The outstanding scene however was that just before the interval when Shylock, desolate over the disappearance of his daughter was caught up in the mad whirl of the carnival; this was a brilliant piece of stagecraft that lodges itself in the memory.[68]

It lodged in mac Liammóir's memory also who recalled: 'what conviction there was in the scene where Shylock returns to find an empty house, fighting his way through the crowds of masked and garlanded revellers under showers of streamers and petals'.[69]

Figure 7. Photograph of Hilton Edwards as Shylock in the 1946 Gate Production of *The Merchant of Venice.* © Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway

[65] Mac Liammóir, 'Three Shakespearian Productions', 96.
[66] See Ian R. Walsh, 'Hilton Edwards as Director: Shade of Modernity', *The Gate Theatre Dublin: Inspiration and Craft*. Eds. David Clare, Des Lally, and Patrick Lonergan (London: Peter Lang, 2018), 29-46.
[67] Seamus Kelly, 'Gaiety Theatre: Merchant of Venice', *Irish Times*, 12 March 1946, 2.
[68] Anonymous, 'New Dublin Shows Reviewed', *Evening Herald,* 12 March 1946, 4.
[69] Mac Liammóir, 'Three Shakespearian Productions,' 95.

Mac Liammóir and Edwards would go on to stage two more productions of *The Merchant of Venice* but did not repeat the experiment of the 1946 production. A reason for this may have been that Edwards feared the dynamism and splendour of the movement and visual aspects of the commedia inspired production came at the cost of a meaningful delivery of Shakespeare's verse. The newspaper reviews do mention that the delivery of some of the lines to have been of poor standard. In a postscript in a letter written to Jeananne Crowley in 1973 before rehearsals began for another Gate production of *The Merchant of Venice* Edwards was keen to communicate that the delivery of Shakespeare's lines be carefully considered writing:

> I would like the verse to sound like verse with much value given to its music; while remembering that it is not an opera and that it is full of good sense, which should be given its full value. In a word, I am trying to hit a happy medium between the operatic hamming of the bad old days and the (to my mind) over-intellectualised gasping astringency of the bad new days.[70]

The second full production that engaged most directly with a commedia style was the Gate production of Carlo Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* in 1973. Goldoni's play adapts the characters of the commedia to an eighteenth-century context removing the traditional masks from the stock characters and making the improvisory nature of the form subservient to a script. Harlequin, renamed Truffaldino, remains the star of the show as he gets himself in all sorts of comic trouble attempting to serve two different masters. The piece retains many of the core elements of the commedia dell'arte including a series of *Lazzi* that Truffaldino and the ensemble must complete with precision, direct address to the audience and a plot concerning lovers (*inamorati*) who strive to beat the odds to be together, although in Goldoni's play the older patriarchs (*vecchi*) are no longer the primary obstacle to the doting couple.

Figure 8. Photograph of Virgina Cole (Smeraldina), Deirdre Maher (Clarice), Arthur O'Sullivan (Pantalone), Gerard McSorley (Silvio) and Christopher Casson (Dr. Lombardi) in the Gate Production of *The Servant of Two Masters* in 1973. © Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway

[70] Letter to Jeananne Crowley from Hilton Edwards, 1 March 1977. The Gate Theatre Digital Archives, NUI Galway. GADM_00002213.pdf | Ref. 6068.

This production by the Gate was an opportunity for Edwards to fully embrace the knockabout farce of the Italian commedia in his direction and for mac Liammóir to delight in the colour and playfulness of the period costuming. The production was well received in the press with the ensemble, under Edwards's direction, praised for its exacting comic timing and characterisation with the headline for the review in *The Irish Examiner* reading 'Delightful play, this so rehearsed, Goldoni classic'.[71] Derry Power in the Harlequin role of Truffaldino was singled out for his 'clever playing' and 'craftmanship' by Noeleen in *The Irish Examiner*; offering her 'splendid comedy' in the famous dinner scene. Desmond Rushe in *The Irish Independent* was less impressed. He enjoyed how 'Power quickly establishes an appealingly Roguish relationship with the audience, and capers through the role with much spirit'.[72] However, he believed that Power did not 'bring to his performance the touch of comic genius which would make it a show-stealer' and that his actions became 'predictable through a lack of variation and or inventiveness'.[73] Rushe found the play overall to be 'a romp which asks nothing of the intellect, while it endlessly titillates the sense of the ridiculous'.[74] The impression given of this production, from the reviews and the photographs in the Gate Theatre Digital Archive, is of a fun slick physical performance of a classic farce but without any of the novelty of interpretation or presentational innovation that had delighted the Gate audiences of the past. It lacked a touch of magic from Harlequin's wand.

Figure 9. Photograph of Derry Power as Truffaldino in Gate Production of *The Servant of Two Masters* in 1973. © Gate Theatre Digital Archive, NUI Galway

[71] Noeleen, 'Delightful play, this so rehearsed, Goldoni classic', *The Irish Examiner*, 7 March 1973: 10.
[72] Desmond Rushe, 'Only Custard Pies Missed', *The Irish Independent,* 7 March 1973, 11.
[73] Rushe 11.
[74] Rushe 11.

Conclusion

This study of commedia dell'arte at the Gate through an examination of the writings and practice of Edwards and mac Liammóir confirms the centrality of this form in defining the Gate's theatrical style in the first four decades of its existence. It was discovered that the commedia dell'arte offered Edwards and mac Liammóir a model of theatrical practice that could encapsulate their previous formative experiences as performers in popular theatre and cabaret, their dedication to world-renowned modernist theatre practitioners and provided them with masked personas that enabled them to present a queer identity. However, in examining how commedia manifested in their productions many of the persistent creative tensions in the work of Edwards and mac Liammóir were also identified. These include the conflict between a commitment to the enunciation of the spoken word and dynamic expressive movement, to elitist artistic experiment or a commercial successful mainstream, to masked queerness or an openly gay identity. Despite the tension it may have brought to the fore in productions, their deliberate association with the commedia dell'arte declared Edwards and mac Laimmóir as disciples of a liberal and experimental international modernism which ran counter to the stultifying conservativism, narrow-minded nationalism and corrosive xenophobia that marked the decades they were producing theatre in Ireland. As so much of Irish theatre history has been dedicated to the work of dramatists and the achievements of the Abbey theatre it is often assumed that the theatrical output of the decades after the Irish revival was uninspired, inward-looking and without artistic invention. This investigation of commedia at the Gate instead reveals how embedded European theatrical practice and modernist experimentation was in the stagecraft of one of Ireland's premiere theatres. The impact of mac Liammóir's and Edwards's influence on theatre practices in Ireland has been emphasised by recent scholarship.[75] By locating a European-wide tradition such as the commedia dell'arte as key to mac Liammóir's and Edwards's practice, new networks of international artistic influence can be traced and charted in the development of contemporary Irish theatre and performance. Ultimately, through the work of Edwards and mac Liammóir the Gate offered a precious open space of theatricality, a space of becoming and belonging where the mischievous indefatigable Harlequin could defy Death and the ever-desiring Pierrot would never cease to dream.

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[75] See *Cultural Convergence: The Dublin Gate Theatre 1928-1960*, eds. Ondrej Pilny, Ruud van den Beuken and Ian R. Walsh (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2021); *The Gate Theatre: A Stage of Emancipation*. eds. Marguérite Corporaal and Ruud van den Beuken (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021); *The Gate Theatre Dublin: Inspiration and Craft*. eds. David Clare, Des Lally, and Patrick Lonergan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018).

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